

Remarks prepared for

David Strickland, Administrator

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Lifesavers

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“Lifesavers at the Heart of Safety”

David (Manning), thank you for the kind introduction. Before I begin, I wanted to acknowledge the wonderful job Alberto and his team have done in hosting this year’s Lifesavers. I have made a lot of effort to have more direct interactions with the Governor’s Representatives over the past year, and I found out a couple of things. Whether I want to avail myself or not, Alberto Gutier will be heard. Period. And second, he is one of the most effective safety leaders in America, and I consider him a friend. Arizona should be proud to have him at the helm for highway safety.

This luncheon is one of my favorite parts of being the Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. I have the honor of meeting some of the most passionate and successful lifesavers we have.

These awards are sincere acknowledgements of a thankful nation for your hard work, but the token is nowhere close to your value to us as a society.

I have been in office for over a year now, and some of my most profound lessons have come from lifesavers. While I had all the confidence in the world about my experience in safety and policy when I took the helm at NHTSA, I also know that you cannot learn this job sitting behind a desk. So I have tried to get out and meet, see, and do as much as I could. While I have a lot of experiences and stories that moved me this past year, I just wanted to take a minute or two to highlight a couple of them.

I had the honor to preside over a public hearing on the proposed rule which would effectively mandate back-up cameras in every vehicle. Our Safety Champion Janette Fennell was there, along with moms and dads who backed over their toddlers because they could not see them. People, who in retelling their stories, re-live their ultimate nightmare. But it was these people and dozens more who told shared their darkest moments and moved a Congress to pass a law mandating that reward visibility in vehicles be improved. These people gave of themselves to save the lives of others. That's one aspect of what Lifesavers is all about.

I am from Atlanta, GA, so this may sound like hometown bias, but I met with group of Georgia State Patrol and officers from around the state, and it was one of my toughest meetings. But they had passion for traffic enforcement and busting impaired drivers. They told me about all the difficulties they face, but despite that, they have the Thunder Task Force, where dozens of officers from around the state descend on a chosen county to do intense saturation traffic enforcement in places that do not have the manpower to do as much they like. And you would think that getting officers to volunteer to move to a remote county for a handful of months to do traffic enforcement would be a recipe for failure. But quite the opposite, the Thunder Task Force has more volunteers than they have spots. Why? These officers see the difference they make in saving lives on the road. That's another aspect of what lifesavers is all about.

While I have had a number of meetings and experiences where I just sit and listen, my staff challenges me to go out and do. “Administrator, you really should experience “X” for yourself, it will give you better insight” into whatever topic is at hand. This has led me to being in cars around the planet hurtling at high rates of speed either towards or into solid objects or shoe-horning me into tiny experimental cars which challenge the bounds of my girth, height, and claustrophobia. Despite their best efforts to injure me or freak me out, I am still here. The latest challenge takes me to the subject of motorcycle safety. Some of you may be aware that riders groups are not very happy with me. In fact, in one national motorcycle publication, the issue was devoted to “The Ten Greatest Threats to Motorcycling.” It is my understanding that I came in at number four.

I took this to heart. And the next time I had a meeting with a riders group, I wanted to have the granular experience to say I have ridden a motorcycle. So I took rider training last weekend. One of my staff at NHTSA, Joey Syner, put his reputation and his employment prospects on the line to teach the Administrator how to ride. An Administrator that has not been on a bicycle since 1993. An Administrator that has never been on a motorcycle. And over three days, Joey taught me not only how to ride, but ride safely. His passion for motorcycling and doing it safely I know has made a difference to every student he has encountered. But it did have its moments. I fell once. The NHTSA staff that were with me said it was a graceful fall and roll. I suppose I would be kissing up to if I thought my job depended on it. Which it did. Joey has the passion and the selflessness to share his safety skills with others, and that makes him a lifesaver too.

Last September, during our National Child Passenger Safety Week event with Safekids, I met Sylvia Perkins-Swain, a child safety seat technician that works in Southeast DC. She waits in a parking lot 3 times a week to teach new parents and parents to be on how to properly install their car seats. She’s been doing this for seven years and is one of the best. She is a combination of toddler whisperer, car seat ninja and drill sergeant, and fully committed to keeping children safe every single trip. She so inspired me that my next minor injury/embarrassment risk is to get my child safety seat installation certification. I will report back next year.....

As you can from some of my experiences and the work you share with my staff, you play a vital role in the work that we do as safety regulators and designers of safety program countermeasures. We are heavily dependent on you for your input. You tell us what works and what doesn't. Your work is the practical laboratory that informs our efforts. But your contributions are more than developmental. They are evolutionary, and they have changed the way we all think about safety.

For example, we announced our revised child restraint guidelines to be categorized by age rather than by type of child seat in order to keep pace with the latest scientific and medical research and the development of new child restraint technologies. That decision is the most recent in a decades-long effort to keep our children safe on the road.

When I was a kid, I remember riding in my Mom's 1977 Lincoln Continental Mark V lying across the rear panel behind the back seat. Parents today wouldn't dream of letting their kids ride in the car in anything but their child safety seat or booster or strapped in with a seat belt. National observational surveys confirm that, particularly for infants, child safety seat use is just about universal.

How did we get from the free-wheeling days of kids riding unrestrained in cars – draped across rear seat backs looking out the windows, playing in the cargo areas of station wagons, in parents' laps in the front seat – to a comprehensive national program for child occupant safety? One of the reasons we arrived here is that you were there to tell us about the consequences of kids riding unrestrained in cars.

The first mandatory child restraint use law was implemented in the State of Tennessee in 1978. Since 1985, all 50 States and the District of Columbia have had child restraint use laws in effect. So it took 7 years for all the States to get a law on the books to protect children in passenger vehicles.

The evolution of highway safety over the years has been shaped by many factors, including highway design, vehicle design, technology, enforcement, and education and outreach. The national highway safety experience evolves as the result of continuous leadership and constant interaction between the public, safety advocacy groups, you, the lifesavers, and the government. Together, we foster and refine safety, keeping pace with technology, public expectations, and demand. Other safety issues also take a while to evolve from first movers to universal adoption. We will continue to stay engaged with you and rely on your knowledge and experience, and thousands of others like you, to reach the next safety threshold.

I'd like to tell you a bit about what we are doing with what we learn from you and how we hope to harness technology to save lives on our roadways.

We're at the threshold of a new safety era. We are reaching out to the American public with a brand new conversation about safety that revolves around safe vehicle designs and emerging technologies.

I wanted to quickly update all of you on our vehicle communications program, which includes vehicle to vehicle communications as well as vehicle to infrastructure. Our research points to a major safety breakthrough, with V2V safety applications possibly addressing as much as 80 percent of crash scenarios involving non-impaired drivers. We are looking at being at the point to make an agency decision on V2V in 2013.

While our V2V research continues, NHTSA has taken the lead on other crash avoidance technologies when we rolled out our enhanced government 5-star safety ratings system with the 2011 model year vehicles.

We thoroughly reviewed and updated the ratings system. We added a family of crash test dummies and a side impact pole test. We established an overall safety score that will combine the star ratings from the front, side, and rollover programs. And, we implemented a program that we hope will encourage consumer demand for, and use of, advanced crash avoidance technologies.

A key component of our effort is a communications program to tell the American public what it all means. We want them to understand why some of the new ratings are lower but more rigorous, and that those lower star ratings do not mean the vehicles are less safe than they were a year ago.

Most importantly, we want the consumer to embrace crash avoidance technologies as a way to make them safer. We want terms like electronic stability control, lane departure warning, and forward collision warning to become part of the consumer's lexicon and comfort zone.

We know that the crash avoidance technology is crucial in helping drivers avoid crashes, and the crashworthiness of vehicles is an essential element to helping people survive those crashes that do occur. But we also know that the vast majority of crashes occur because of dangerous behavior. I'm talking about drivers who make poor decisions, including driving impaired, driving while distracted, and speeding, to name a few.

NHTSA's National Motor Vehicle Crash Causation Study showed that in about 95 percent of serious crashes driver error was attributed to the event that precipitated the crash. One agency strategy to combat this kind of destructive behavior is our well-known national high visibility enforcement campaigns.

We are also exploring the use of technology to mitigate the effects of these risky behaviors. For example, in early 2008, NHTSA and the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety entered into a cooperative research agreement to look at in-vehicle technology to prevent alcohol-impaired driving. Through this effort, we are exploring the feasibility, understanding the potential benefits, and identifying the public policy challenges associated with a more widespread use of in-vehicle technology to prevent alcohol-impaired driving.

We are seeking to develop technologies that can accurately and reliably detect alcohol impairment and prevent impaired drivers from starting or operating their vehicle. Rather than focusing on police detecting and arresting impaired drivers on the road, this effort seeks to prevent impaired drivers from operating their vehicle.

This will be a long-term effort – but we are hopeful it will produce a technology that is completely invisible to the driver and could be widely installed on a voluntary, market-driven basis. We are now moving this technology out of the laboratory and into test vehicles. If this technology proves effective, our task then becomes discussing this idea with the public.

It is clear that we cannot regulate or legislate risk away. It's already illegal to engage in these dangerous behaviors while behind the wheel, yet people continue to break the law.

I would like to take a moment to discuss another dangerous driving where our collective efforts are moving to evolve behaviors, distracted driving. Under Secretary LaHood's leadership, we are engaging them in a conversation about safety and distraction behind the wheel of a vehicle.

We are building momentum against Distracted Driving. In addition to reaching out to them, NHTSA is developing an evaluative framework for in-car technologies. Rather than react to every technology as it pops up and becomes a distraction, NHTSA needs a framework that clearly defines the danger zone for the driver — allowing us to keep pace with technology, rather than playing catch-up.

We will not take a back seat while new dashboard or handheld *infotainment* systems are introduced. These have too great a potential to create additional distraction for the driver. As part of our NHTSA Distraction Plan we are taking a hard look at developing guidelines and requirements for these systems. We have challenged the auto industry and the cell phone industry to

work collaboratively with us to keep the driver focused on their required task: driving, and to keep them, and everyone with whom they share the road, safe.

Ultimately, it is up to the driver to make safe choices when getting behind the wheel of a vehicle. But manufacturers can help by designing products with safety in mind, law enforcement can persuade them with high visibility enforcement, and we can educate drivers about the risks they are taking.

The work you carry on today is vital, and is a continuation of the body of work the Lifesavers community has delivered during the last 30 years. I don't know what issue we will be discussing 30 years from now, but I am certain we will still need safety practitioners to promote traffic safety with individuals and communities, develop and implement innovative programs, and provide the invaluable hands-on experience that will be necessary to succeed.

On behalf of Secretary LaHood and President Obama, I thank you. Now, let's get on to the business at hand, honoring the NHTSA Public Service Award recipients for 2011.

Thank you.

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